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ABSTRACT

It is argued that while it is important to make the French second language curriculum relevant to today's world, it is also important not to neglect the cultural and literary components of the traditional French major, including those learning French for business. In light of this, several French novels, plays, and stories in which business is a major element are recommended as reading for students of business French, who have or would easily learn the business, commercial, financial, and legal vocabulary incorporated into them. The novels include: Honore de Balzac's "Cesar Birotteau"; Balzac's "L'Illustre Gaudissart," "Le Faiseur" (or the play "Mercadet" based on it); "Le Gendre de M. Poirier" by Emile Augier; Emile Zola's "Au Bonheur des Dames," "Le Ventre de Paris," "La Curee," and "L'Argent"; Henri Becque's "Les Corbeaux"; Octave Mirbeau's "Les Affaires sont les affaires"; and "Fromont Jeune et Risler aine" by Octave Mirbeau. Among the themes and issues in these works are bankruptcy, marketing, advertising, ambition, corruption, general commercial activity, and women in the world of business. (MSE)

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Maurice G.A. Elton

French business/Literary authors

The World of Business and Commerce as seen by French Literary Authors.

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It is this author's considered opinion that the sound acquisition of French for business not only opens up the way to an interesting and fulfilling career, but provides the means to read for pleasure and to understand many works in French literature that have been sadly neglected over the years. This has been caused in part by an unawareness of such works, or if known, by an unjustified admonition that the works in question are too technical or not worthy of serious study. This position continues to be held by a number of French literature teachers whose lives are devoted entirely to the higher calling of literature.

And it is the author's position that we need to make the teaching of French more pertinent to today's world while at the same time, preventing the neglect of the cultural and literary components of the traditional French major or minor. I believe that a solid and thorough course in business French can provide the necessary training and background to tackle an advanced literature and culture course in such a related topic as this. There is no reason why short extracts from a selected few representative literary works could not be incorporated at some point, time permitting, into the French for Business course. This would introduce to students the fact that there is indeed a close relationship between the world of business and the numerous literary works written during the French nineteenth century and which deal with this very subject, namely, business and commercial activity and the primary preoccupation of the French during the nineteenth century, the search for "**l'argent**."

Before proceeding any further, allow me as author to insert a brief aside to describe how I became involved in this particular field of study. One of the very first texts I used for teaching business French was the well-known *Le Français Commercial* by Mauger and Charon. The companion reader contains selections from technical works that help illustrate a certain aspect of trade or commercial activity. There are also brief extracts from a few literary works. I really did not give much thought to this relationship until the Fall of 1989 when I was a visiting professor at the University of Texas in Austin. After having suggested to a student who was taking both my Business French Class and my French Civilization since the Revolution course, that he might consider Balzac's *César Birotteau* as a possible subject for a term paper in the civilization course, I thought that I had better read the novel myself in order to give him guidance. My temporary "bachelor" status at the time allowed me to read almost non-stop the complete novel during one week-end. As I read, I noted commercial vocabulary and jotted down comments. Needless to say, my background in *le Français des affaires* enabled me not only to fully understand the novel, but to thoroughly enjoy it. I could not help but question how it was that during a career devoted to French literature, I had not really been more fully aware of this particular Balzac novel. The title had seemed somewhat familiar but I could not recall any commentaries or references to it in anthologies.

In my opinion, as a teacher of business French, I consider *César Birotteau* to be one of Balzac's outstanding early novels. It was published in serial form in 1830. It has never been given its due place in American anthologies. This may be due partly to the admonition by Professor Eugène Bergeron of the University of Chicago who, in 1895, first introduced Balzac to American students. In his introduction to his edition of *Eugénie Grandet*, he mentions other works including *César Birotteau* which he describes in these words: "Description of ambition which goes as far as monomania; hard to

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read on account of commercial technicalities." I wonder if Professor Bergeron had actually read the novel. A few years ago I did ask a Balzac scholar, who name I shall not mention, whether he had read *César Birotteau*. He admitted that he had never been able to finish reading it.

Except for a passage in which Balzac expounds on the subject of bankruptcy, the novel reads fairly easily for one who is conversant with the numerous business, commercial, financial, and legal vocabulary which are to be found on nearly every page of Balzac's novel, a total of some 162 basic terms, still in use today, that are used over and over again thoughout the novel. Who is this César Birotteau described in detail in the novel, the full title of which is: *Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau, marchand parfumer, adjoint au maire du deuxième arrondissement de Paris, chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, etc.* The hero is a respectable and fairly prosperous Paris businessman, who has worked his way up in the world, beginning as an apprentice. He hopes now to expand his business and prosperity --one must think of retirement years-- through the development and marketing of a new hair oil which does indeed begin to gain a market niche. However, his promotion to the Légion d'Honneur and his subsequent obsession with the fact that he must act in a more ostentatious way gives rise to unchecked pride. There is a price to pay. Unfortunately, unwise and speculative investments in a suspicious land development project, plus deals with unscrupulous "associates" all lead to the perfumer's bankruptcy, the ultimate disgrace in the Parisian world of business. It should be mentioned that bankruptcy is still considered in France to be a crime, though perhaps not so severely punished as in Balzac's days.

I believe we are all familiar with Balzac's life, his involvement in several unsuccessful business ventures, and his vast knowledge of post-revolutionary commercial activity. Balzac is scrupulous in his detailed accounting of Birotteau's total bankruptcy debt. Based on a careful reading, it is possible to draw up a balance sheet of the hero's liabilities and assets and which is accurate to the last detail. There are those who believe that Birotteau was perhaps a portrait of Balzac himself, especially in the matter of probity, a term which is mentioned some 28 times throughout the novel, and which is proved at the end when Birotteau, through hard work and savings, is finally able to pay off his debt, every centime of it. Though practically and continually in debt, Balzac kept nevertheless detailed records of all his purchases and transactions throughout his life.

Since my first critical reading of *César Birotteau*, I have continued to draw up and expand a bibliography of authors and works in which the topic or plot is commercial activity. The bibliography, which is included as an appendix to this paper, is by no means exhaustive since new titles are being discovered, checked, added, and as time permits, read.

There is no doubt that of all the writers I have studied thus far, Balzac is the only one who, thanks to his intimate knowledge of the world of business, is the most authentic in his depiction of daily commercial activity, from the dark and dingy offices of the avoué Derville in his novel *Le Colonel Chabert*, to the awe-inspiring domains of the bankers and financiers.

We could spend many, many hours discussing just one author, namely Balzac and his portrayal of *les hommes d'affaires* in his numerous works. In *César Biroteau*, the marketing of the new hair oil allows Balzac a free hand at writing advertising copy, and being the first to recognize the importance and power of the newspaper for advertising purposes. In the days when journalists expected news to

come to them, it was easy to give them a free lunch and feed them a good story, especially if it dealt with a remarkable new hair oil and the copy was already written for them. Birotteau sees the importance of marketing his new product, not so much in Paris as in the Provinces. Being starved for real news, the Provincials devour the Parisian newspapers that finally reach them, reading every word on every page. It is not long before mail orders from pharmacists and individuals begin to arrive. Birotteau has entrusted his new business venture entirely to his young assistant Popinot. who is operating the enterprise under a different corporate name, a factor which proves advantageous later on when bankruptcy overtakes Birotteau. His young and energetic manager recruits in turn his friends who are delighted to provide assistance and suggestions in this new and exciting adventure of launching a new product on the market. Balzac introduces us to young Gaudissart, who excels at copy writing and who will later be the hero of another Balzac story, *l'Illustre Gaudissart*, which describes the life and exploits of a highly successful and famous salesman. There is also Finot who sees the fortune to be made in advertising and who invests in a small town newspaper and becomes its editor. It is interesting to note that none of these young entrepreneurs had ever attended business school or taken courses in advertising. All was based on observation, common sense, and a concern for satisfied customers.

Another major Balzac work about which I wish to comment is one that has remained somewhat in obscurity for many years, namely, *Le Faiseur*. The play is usually referred to as *Mercadet*. Mercadet is indeed the name of the main character but it is also the title of the adaption of Balzac's original play by d'Ennery which, to my mind, is an inferior work compared to Balzac's own final version. One will be surprised to learn that Balzac's *Le Faiseur* was performed at **La Comédie française** in April 1993. The version used is the one completed by Balzac in 1851, following ten years of revision, and finished just before his death. *Le Faiseur* deals entirely with speculation. Mercadet, a financier, is endeavoring to hold at bay numerous creditors who are always able to be convinced to grant more time or credit on the assumption that Mercadet is about to realize an even greater fortune on the stock market and that they will eventually benefit by a larger margin of profit. He knows his creditors well and their propensity for greed. Part of Mercadet's woes are compounded by the fact that his partner had supposedly absconded several years earlier with some of the partnership money, but had promised to return to settle debts. In fact, the partner, for whom they are all waiting and whose name Mercardet invokes at every opportune moment is GODEAU. A careful reading of the play proves that Balzac was finally able to write a piece for the theater which has substance and flows fairly well. However, when the play was performed at La Comédie Française in 1993, there was considerable editing of the original Balzac text. There was no doubt some question as to whether a present-day Parisian audience would be familiar with many of the ideas or situations to which Balzac was alluding. This is obvious as one listens to a recording of the actual performance and follows along with the original text. The play, as presented, depicts the efforts of a crafty businessman to stay one step ahead of his creditors. The ending is a classic Deus-ex-machina one. Godeau (we never see him), does returns from overseas as a wealthy man, and pays off Mercadet's creditors in full. A typical Molière-type final scene occurs when Mercadet's daughter gets to marry the man she truly loves, a man with a menial job and doubtful future, yet turns out to be none other than Godeau's only son.

There are so many points of departure that present themselves in many of these works as authors portrayed the society and mores of the day. As a growing and influential class, the Bourgeoisie was able to choose among many professions: property investments, industrial activity, wholesale merchants, bankers, lawyers, etc. But its was obsessed with, and devoted to the goal of increasing its wealth. The

political reality of France immediately following the 1848 Revolution provided ample opportunities, ways and means. Many of the works listed do indeed provide interesting commentaries and descriptions of business practices of the day. But the writers also allude to the numerous societal problems which surfaced as a new and influential class began to impose its mores and code of conduct. For example, the question of marriage, a topic introduced numerous times within these literary works, is often dictated by parents who are not so much concerned by a daughter's well-being or happiness, but more often by wealth and standing of the prospective son-in-law, especially if a noble title is involved. In some cases, a noble title is all a penniless noble has to offer. In one notable case among many, a father expounds on the benefits of having a daughter who can acquire a new name for the family and adds: "Nous avons acheté en cinq minutes 700 ans de noblesse." (*L'Etrangère*, by Dumas fils). We should certainly not forget Emile Augier's 1854 play *Le Gendre de M. Poirier*, in which a financially-strapped Marquis believes he can continue his style of life at the expense of his rich bourgeois father-in-law. To take another example. there is also the changing role of women within the context of this middle class business world. Although we think first of men in the world of business, women could very well be the subject of a separate study as will be quite obvious if we were to examine just two works among many: Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *Le Ventre de Paris*. We see in some cases strong-willed women who keep businesses flourishing; then on the opposite side, we see women completely bewildered by it all in such plays as in Henri Becque's *Les Corbeaux* and Octave Mirbeau's *Les Affaires sont les affaires*. Yet we witness how in one major work by Alphonse Daudet, *Fromont Jeune et Risler ainé*, the actions of Sidonie, the young wife of the older partner in a prosperous Parisian wallpaper manufacturer, leads to bankruptcy and tragedy.

As we read about the commercial activity of the day as described by these authors, we realize that little has changed. Of all the authors in the bibliography, it is without doubt that Balzac was perhaps the only writer who could call upon his own intimate knowledge of the business world. The other author who comes closest is Zola. My first choice for a work that best fits our category would be *Au Bonheur des Dames*, For Zola, an author unfamiliar with the world of business, this meant close observation, sometimes spanning months, of the subject about which he wished to write. *Au Bonheur des Dames* is essentially the detailed description of the daily life of the then modern department store. The arrival of a glittering showcase of merchandise, variety, and low prices causes consternation among the smaller single-product shopkeepers whose dingy, smelly shops are being passed-up by former customers on their way to the bargain-of-the-day sale. It is a situation not unlike the WAL-MART about to open for business in a small town. Zola, in his portrayal of this new business phenomenon does not follow chronological time and so we have *Un Grand Magasin* that embodies all of the features that these emporiums developed over the years. The November 1994 issue of *Consumer Reports* had a feature article on "Rating the Stores" and which provided also a brief history on retailing in the US. Yet much of what we accept to day was part of the revolutionary ideas of Aristide Boucicaut who lived from 1810-1877, and was the founder of **Au Bon Marché**. His Eight Commandments were: 1. Free access and the invitation to actually touch or handle the merchandise. 2. Increase number of departments and variety of Merchandise. 3. Fixed prices. 4 smaller profit margin (20%) as opposed to 40-50%) 5. Return of goods if dissatisfied. 6 Home delivery. 7. Department head responsible for choosing and purchasing goods for sale. 8. profit rebate to employees.

To illustrate the point that many of the literary works identified contain extensive passages pertaining to the specific description of a commercial activity and which can be easily understood by

students of business French, we cite one from *Au Bonheur des dames* in which Octave Mouret, the founder and owner of the department store of the same name, is trying to persuade a member of the nobility to invest money.

> --Vous entendez, monsieur le baron, toute la mécanique est là, C'est bien simple, mais il fallait le trouver. Nous n'avons pas besoin d'un gros roulement de fonds. Notre effort unique est de nous débarasser très vite de la marchandise achetée, pour la remplacer par d'autre, ce qui fait rendre au capital autant de fois son intérêt. De cette manière, nous pouvons nous contenter d'un petit bénéfice; comme nos frais généraux s'élèvent au chiffre énorme de seize pour cent, et que nous ne prélevons guère sur les objets que vingt pour cent de gain, c'est donc un bénéfice de quatre pour cent au plus; seulement, cela finira par faire des millions, lorsqu'on opéra sur des quantités de marchandises considérables et sans cesse renouvelées... Vous suivez, n'est-ce-pas? rien de plus clair.
> --Le baron hocha la tête, (...) -- j'entends bien, répondit-il. Vous vendez bon marché pour vendre beaucoup, et vous vendez beaucoup pour vendre bon marché... Seulement, il faut vendre, et j'en reviens à ma question: à qui vendrez-vous? Comment espérez-vous entretenir une vente aussi colossale?[1]

It is obvious that Octave Mouret has discovered the principle that in moving merchandise in the way he has devised, namely that initial investment capital can be recycled up to many times a year while generating a modest but growing margin of interest. And the answer to the baron's question: *...à qui vendrez-vous?* is obvious. It is *aux dames*. Mouret did not need to engage in market surveys to reach this conclusion. A recent INSEE survey conducted in France during 1993 revealed that women outspend men when it comes to overall spending, primarily on clothes. Mouret knew what he was doing when he aimed his whole marketing philosophy and strategy at women. Mouret at first had little or no competition. In today's world, however, many stores are trying to emulate Mouret's success. *Women's Wear*, an American trade magazine, conducted a survey the last part of 1994 to discover which major national retail stores women shoppers liked to shop.

It will be quite obvious as one begins to study these works that it is not so much a matter of reading a business manual for French 19th century commercial activity but rather a social history describing how many average citizens created wealth for themselves either through honest business enterprises or via unscrupulous schemes. In some instances, the works could be considered case studies, especially Balzac's *César Birotteau*, which not only traces every step that leads to the final moment of bankruptcy and eventual recovery, but presents in every detail the society, the mores, in fact the total Parisian environment in which our hero Cesar Birotteau lives and works. And it has to be admitted that the primary pre-occupation of everyone of the day was the unmentionable word *Argent*. As Jean Giraud states in Alexandre Dumas fils *La Question d'argent* (1857):

> "je ne dis cela pour moi, Madame, mais je sais ce que je dis; l'argent est l'argent, quelles que soient les mains où il se trouve. C'est la seule puissance que l'on ne discute jamais. On discute la vertu, la beauté, le courage, le génie; on ne

> discute jamais l'argent. Il n'y pas un être civilisé qui, en se levant le matin, ne reconnaisse la souveraineté de l'argent, sans lequel il n'aurait ni le toit qui l'abrite, ni le lit où il couche, ni le pain qu'il mange." (Act I, Sc 4).

Elsewhere, the comment is made: "Les affaires, c'est bien simple, c'est l'argent des autres." (Act II, Sc 7). This brings to mind the 1978 Cesar-award French film *L'Argent des autres*, starring Jean-Louis Trintignant, Catherine Deneuve, and Michel Sarrault, in which a private bank engages in less-than-honest manipulation of investors' funds and deposits. And how can fail to recall that it is possibly Octave Mirbeau's bitter satire of business practices of his day that gave us *Les Affaires sont les affaires* (1903) which has remained, for better or for worse, a much-used expression.

Certainly, one does not wish to have the subject of money dominate our discussion but it is difficult not to mention Balzac who, thoughout his life, was in constant search of the same and is perhaps, of all French authors, the most qualified and knowledgeable to address the matter. In his *Avant-Propos* to his *Code des gens honnêtes* he writes:

> L'argent, par le temps qui court, donne le plaisir, la considération les amis, les succès, les talents, l'esprit même; ce doux métal doit donc être l'objet constant de l'amour et de la sollicitude des mortels de tout âge, de toute condition, depuis les rois jusqu'aux grisettes, depuis les propriétaires jusqu'aux émigrés. Mais cet argent, source de tous les plaisirs, origine de toutes les gloires, est aussi le but de toutes les tentatives. La vie peut être considérée comme un combat perpétuel entre les riches et les pauvres.

Balzac's treatise, an extremely humorous expose of the myriad ways, means, and methods used by one segment of the population to deprive the other of its money and fortune is addressed to *les gens honnêtes* of his day who must be constantly vigilant if they expect to protect their wealth and money. Human nature being what it is, Balzac's treatise is as current today as it was when he first conceived of it as a guide and "manual" in 1825. It was obviously his *vade mecum* as he wrote *La Comédie humaine*. All teachers will be amused by Balzac's comments about the following:

> "Cours de la langue italienne en vingt-quatre leçons; cours de mnémotechnie en douze séances; cours de musique en trente-deux leçons; l'écriture apprise en dix leçons, etc. Nous ne ferons pas l'injure de commenter ces charlanteries."

What an interesting coincidence, after having typed this quotation, to read a Consumers Report (July 1993) rubric on sales hype: Sony's new method called Natural Japanese with a brochure proclaiming: "Learn Japanese in 3 seconds!"

No. It is not easy to avoid the mention of money in many of these literary works. This certainly

true in novels such as *Le Ventre de Paris, La Curée*, and *l'Argent* by Emile Zola who describes in fairly great detail the power of money, corruption, scandals. The methods used by Saccard to realise a fortune in *La Curée* (1872) are similar to those used by land owners in the Dallas, Texas area during the early 1980's to inflate land values and to bankrupt several financial institutions. In *Le Ventre de Paris*, the scene is Les Halles de Paris. Zola paints in detail not only every Baltard Pavillon and the display of wholesale foods, meat, fruit, flowers, groceries, etc., but also the women who toil long hours at often times back-breaking work. After reading the novel, one wonder's what would have happened to daily life in Paris had women decided to strike or to revolt.

And now a final note. A rapid persusal of the present, incomplete bibliography will confirm that this is not only a fairly new field but a vast untapped source for works in which one finds varying portrayals and descriptions of commercial activity within the burgeoning Bourgeois class in nineteenth century France. All this provides a valuable, new and detailed insight into the French society of the day as many of its members became part of the third sector of the economy.

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[1] p. 113 Gallimard: Paris, 1991 (Collection Folio)